

Dear Lord,

Be with us and our children now as they enter adolescence. Give them the courage to be different and not be compelled by the unthinking crowd, as they develop strong loyalties to friends. Give them the strength to guide and control new physical powers as they grow and develop strong. Give them reverence for their bodies and for their role in divine creation, as they mature. Let the normal attraction between the sexes be for them a further unfolding of Your Plan for life and love, and not a path of temptation and compromise.

Hold them in your hand when they experience doubt and frustration about their own identities. Give them also discernment and docility and a little patience, lest they become prideful and rebellious, as they develop new powers of mind and a questioning spirit. Give us in these days a touch of Solomon's wisdom, to realize that much of their behavior stems from change and confusion and not disrespect. Give us wisdom to know when to say "yes" and when to say "no"; when to forbid and when to forget; when to punish and when to praise. And finally, give us the courage to let them grow away from us, as they grow in age and grace and wisdom, under Your care.

AMEN.

Good evening! It is so great to see all of you, parents and guardians of returning students, as well as parents of freshman and transfer students. Your presence here this evening is a living sign of the love that you have for your sons. We feel privileged to be your partners in the education of your sons. Yesterday, our archbishop Cardinal DiNardo celebrated our first all-school mass, which was a Mass of the Holy Spirit. He gave a wonderful homily praising the academic life, and challenged us to relate all parts of our lives, to the spiritual. Indeed God is to be found everywhere. Our challenge is to not allow ourselves to be blinded to His consistent presence around us.

In that light, I'd like to address a few issues with you this evening that have an impact on your son's health, happiness, safety, and well-being. Indeed these issues would seem overwhelming, but as Christians we realize that we are guided by a loving God who has sent the Holy Spirit among us, so that although we need to be cautious and aware, we have no need to fear.

As educators we would like to acknowledge the fears and anxieties that you as parents face. Our faculty recently attended a workshop given by Dr. Rob Evans, author of *Family Matters*, which treats the changing dilemmas families face and how it affects their relationship with schools. At Mass, we pray that the Lord "deliver us from all anxiety". My own definition of anxiety is: "fear beyond what is reasonable". We know that the entire process of college admissions has changed over the past couple of decades. As a college preparatory school we realize the anxieties that you have over getting your son into a good college or university. Our new NAVIANCE on line program is a great asset as your son moves forward in his education. For families of our upperclassmen I encourage you to sit down with your sons and explore it together – it has so much to offer.

Dr. Evans also pointed out something that is very true. As society gets more sophisticated, complex, but also sets more traps for young people to fall into, we adults, both parents and educators, need to make sure that we do not shelter a teenager too much. Let's think back to our own teenage years: the struggles, the loneliness, the moral dilemmas, but most importantly, the mistakes we made. Although we made some bad choices, we learned from those mistakes. We need to allow our young men to suffer the consequences of their bad choices rather than shelter them from the fallout. Since the beginning of education and the establishment of schools, students have failed tests, quizzes, classes and projects. In athletics, athletes have struck out, missed a pass, or didn't cross the finish line early enough. As their

caregivers, we have a tendency to want to shelter them from the pain that accompanies failure. We want to protect them from the consequences of their poor choices. Yet for the sake of their own wellbeing, their own maturity, and yes, their own health, we need to let them fail, face the consequences, and develop skills to carry them through the next hurdles that await them. We need to be careful not to nag teachers or coaches to change the situation or alter the results so that the young man will never experience the consequences of failure – it would be a disservice to him. The Apostles of Jesus Christ were men of the world who made all kinds of mistakes. Jesus prayed to the Father on their behalf, but also recognized that through pain and suffering, there is a tremendous opportunity for growth. While we should never push any young person towards failure – we should help him develop the skills to avoid it ON HIS OWN rather than change or adapt the circumstances around him so that he doesn't have the opportunity to learn from his mistakes.

This school is filled with over 700 of the brightest and most talented young men in the Houston area. We praise them for their successes and their accomplishments. We pat them on the back when they try their best but obtain a result different from what their goal had been. Like you and I, they are human beings who make mistakes. Like you and I, they need to develop coping skills to deal with adversity, strategies to deal with people with whom they do not get along or perhaps do not understand, and courage to deal with failure. If we attempt to fix the playing field so that they never fail, then they would be missing normal and essential opportunities for growth.

This evening I would like to address a few very specific issues:

- 1) Cell phones. Although a student may carry a cell phone in the bottom of his back pack, it must be turned off whenever he is in the building. He may not use it in the building EVER – it will be confiscated if he does. Unfortunately not only are cell phones disruptive, but they now carry the possibility for pictures taking, either for purposes of cheating or taking pictures of those who do not want their picture taken. I would ask you to please help us with this situation. **PLEASE DO NOT CALL OR SEND A TEXT MESSAGE TO YOUR SON DURING THE SCHOOL DAY.** You are putting him at a situation where he will be punished. He is allowed to use his phone outside the building before or after school or if he is outdoors for lunch. He

needs to be free of both the distraction and the temptations of cell phone use while in the school building. We are grateful for your cooperation and understanding.

- 2) Internet Use. Those of you who have been here for the past few years have heard me address this before. The internet has great resources and also has so many dangers. You have a RIGHT and an OBLIGATION to know what your son is up to on line. He should NOT have a computer hooked up to the internet in his bedroom with the door closed. It is an invitation to all kinds of dangers and strangers to be present in his room without any kind of supervision. You lock the doors of your home at night to protect your family. Likewise you need to set limitations on the millions of doors opened on an unregulated Internet.

Social Networking can be valuable, but it is very risky. Most young people now have accounts on facebook. I would encourage you to consider the option of establishing your own facebook accounts, and make sure your children and you officially befriend each other. That way you can keep up with what they are doing, what they are saying, what they are posting. They may nag you and whine that you have no right to look into to their personal lives. As parents you have every right to do whatever you must in order to protect them.

There was a HORRIFIC story out of New Berlin, Wisconsin this past spring. A male high school senior created a phony profile pretending he that he was a young female. Through very crafty manipulation, he convinced at least 31 of his fellow school mates to exchange inappropriate pictures of themselves with this fictitious young lady. This can easily be done with a cell phone or digital camera, on the spur of the moment, without thinking. Once he obtained these inappropriate pictures of his classmates, he then blackmailed those same students into indecent acts by threatening to expose their inappropriate pictures to their families, school officials, and to everyone at school. He ended up doing severe damage to many of those students, and is now facing a sentence of 300 years in jail. What astounded me was that not ONE of those 31 blackmailed students were comfortable enough to go tell a parent, a school official, or anyone – because they were so ashamed and so afraid. This crime of manipulation took place on Facebook. Earlier I spoke of allowing our sons to learn from their mistakes, either in the classroom, on the athletic field and even in their social lives. This kind of mistake, however, could have and should have been avoided – if parents had

supervised their children's internet use more closely. We love them too much to ever allow them to be this hurt.

- 3) Truly the best way to tackle and handle the anxieties of being parents of teenagers is constant, deliberate, scheduled and consistent communication within the family. This includes eating meals together. I know how difficult that can be nowadays. This includes constant dialogue and communication about such issues as substance abuse, alcohol, dating, time management, cell phones, and internet. I plead with you to commit yourselves to never allowing alcohol to be served to minors in your homes. You would be putting too many young people at risk.
- 4) My greatest encouragement to you this evening is to be a **SPIRITUAL** family. Families need to **PRAY** together. They need to worship together: attend mass on Sunday if you are Catholic, or worship together according to your own religious tradition or affiliation. For those young men of confirmation age, despite the difficulty with time management and scheduling, they should be in confirmation preparation at their parish or church. They need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to descend upon them. I encourage families to attend our upcoming archdiocesan conference at the George R. Brown Convention Center: **CALL TO HOLINESS**. A special youth track will be held on Saturday, September 12. Although we are encouraging our young men to attend through their parish youth groups, we will also have a group of students attending from St. Thomas: your son's theology teacher has all of the information as well as registration forms.

Once again, **THANK YOU** for confiding your sons to us this year. Let us all be guided by the Holy Spirit as we forge on ahead to provide the best education we can for the young Men of St. Thomas. **THANK YOU** and God bless you!